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SUBJECT: LEGAL PROCEEDINGS AGAINST MUSLIM EXTREMIST SUSPECTS

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Summary and Introduction

1.(U) On September 12, Austrian police arrested three suspected Muslim extremists in connection with a video that surfaced in March threatening to attack Austria and Germany unless the two nations withdrew their personnel from Afghanistan. Pre-trial judicial investigations against the suspects are underway. The prime suspect is Mohamed Mahmoud, a 22-year old Austrian of Egyptian background. The others are his 20-year old wife and a 26-year old Austrian of Pakistani background, who was released from custody on September 14 due to lack of evidence. Charges against Mahmoud include membership in a terrorist organization and coercion of the government. The others are charged with membership in a terrorist organization. Mahmoud is suspected of having considered buying explosives from Said Namouh, but according to Interior Minister Guenter Platter, there was no discernible plot for an attack in Austria. End Summary.

Police Investigations

2.(U) For several months, police authorities had investigated Mohamed Mahmoud, the chairman of a small Muslim organization called "Islamic Youth of Austria." Mahmoud had openly supported Muslim extremism. Police surveillance of Mahmoud included phone and E-mail monitoring and his apartment was bugged. Mahmoud is alleged to have been in Internet contact with the al-Qaeda network and is suspected of operating the German-language Web site for the Global Islamic Media Front, an al-Qaeda propaganda group. On September 12, Austrian police arrested Mahmoud and his wife, who had planned to leave Austria to go on their honeymoon, as well as a third suspect, an Austrian of Pakistani background. Simultaneously, Canadian authorities, who had worked closely with Austrian police on the case, arrested Said Namouh in Quebec on charges of "conspiring for the purpose of delivering, placing, discharging or detonating an explosive in a place outside Canada." Supposedly, Namouh had been in intensive internet contact with Mahmoud including discussions about buying explosives and was planning to leave Canada.

3.(SBU) Mahmoud is suspected of delivering a message in Arabic on a video threatening Austria and Germany, while his wife is suspected of producing the German subtitles for the video. The third suspect was initially suspected of having filmed the video. He was, however, released from arrest on September 14 since the investigative judge in the case did not consider the evidence sufficient for investigative detention. According to media reports, he may merely have been a close friend of Mahmoud. The case against him is, however, not yet closed, as the Vienna Prosecutor's office confirmed to Embassy.

Judicial proceedings

4.(SBU) Christian Gneist, spokesman of the Vienna Criminal Court, confirmed to the Embassy that the investigative judge's next examination of the detention of the suspects is scheduled for September 26. Subsequently, the investigative judge is obliged to periodically evaluate the pre-trial detention to examine whether the grounds for detention are still valid. Police have indicated that the analysis of the suspect's computer material may last up to two months. Sentences for membership in a terrorist association range up to ten years, for coercion of the government up to 15 years.

Suspect in Canada

5.(U) Austrian authorities are not commenting on the case of the arrested suspect in Canada. According to Austrian press reports, the next evaluation of his detention is scheduled for September 20. Canadian police are reportedly analyzing his computer material.

Mahmoud - Dangerous or Dilettante?

6.(U) Since the arrests, the media have increasingly questioned whether the suspects had posed a real threat to Austria. Mahmoud had previously made intensive efforts to seek media attention, and had revealed his alleged membership in radical Islamic groups such as Salafia Alijihadia and Jihad Islam in letters to the press.

7.(U) Bio Note: Mahmoud's family is of Egyptian origin. His father is an Imam who is suspected of having some questionable contact to Islamist circles. Mahmoud attended the Saudi Arabian high school in Vienna but dropped out. In 2005, he founded the "Islamic Youth of Austria," an extremist splinter group which organized, inter alia, demonstrations against the U.S. presence in Iraq. Mahmoud also started his own website where he presented photos of Muslims abused by U.S. soldiers. During the campaign for the 2006 parliamentary elections, he distributed leaflets appealing to Muslims not to vote in the elections. Subsequently, police investigated him on charges of "obstructing participation in elections." In reaction, Mahmoud sent out confusing messages regarding the issue of Muslim participation in elections. He also criticized the Islamic Community of Austria (IGGiOe), the organization officially representing Austrian Muslims, as not representing the true Islam, and calling them "kufir" (infidels).

Official Islamic Community Reaction

8.(U) Following the arrests, IGGiOe President Anas Schakfeh stressed that the IGGiOe had known Mahmoud and had "problems" with him. Schakfeh characterizes the arrested suspects as "not harmless, but dilettantes." They belonged to a minority of Austrian Muslims who opposed the IGGiOe. The IGGiOe also reiterated its commitment to prevent the emergence of radical views in Muslim communities.

Comment

9.(SBU) The Abu Nidal attack at Vienna's Schwechat airport in 1985 was the last terrorist act in Austria. Although the Interior Ministry claims that extremist Islamic cells in Austria only consist of a handful of people (under close surveillance by intelligence authorities), the 9/12 arrests have triggered an intense public debate on the integration of Muslims in Austria. The government has reacted by commissioning a report on the state of integration efforts in Austria. Rightwing parties, on the other hand, are attempting to exploit public fears of a radicalization among Austrian Muslims with calls that Muslims in Austria must, in essence, assimilate into mainstream Austrian culture.

McCaw